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ABSTRACT

Tutoring teenagers is as much about building self confidence as teaching skills. This paper states that teenagers who have disengaged from reading probably had difficulty learning to read in the primary grades. According to most research, at this critical age, they missed the pleasure of getting lost in a story or discovering new information in books. The paper finds that, by their teenage years, reading becomes a school-imposed activity. It asks tutors to think of tutoring as awakening a young person to the expansive world of print information, literature, and the infinite possibilities of reading, writing, and talking. And it provides 14 questions for tutors to consider as they prepare for their unique tutoring situation, questions such as the following: What choices can you give students? What strategies encourage independence and engagement? How can you build confidence and pride? How can conversation develop literacy skills? and How can you incorporate reading aloud in tutoring sessions? (NKA)

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Motivating Reluctant Adolescent Readers

Strategies for National Service Tutors

"I DON'T LIKE TO READ BECAUSE I don't know how to read."
—Eighth-grader Kenny in *Just Teach Me, Mrs. K.*, by Mary Krogness

How can you motivate adolescents who have never turned on to the magic of reading?

Tutoring teenagers is as much about building self-confidence as teaching skills. Low self-image and feelings of powerlessness trouble many unmotivated adolescents.

Teenagers who have disengaged from reading probably had difficulty learning to read in the primary grades, according to most research. At this critical age, they missed the pleasure of getting lost in a story or discovering new information in books. By their teenage years, reading becomes a school-imposed activity. As adults, they might read well enough to get by, but they miss the personal satisfaction and professional benefits that good literacy skills provide.

Critical literacy is a state of being "wide-awake," says educator and author Maxine Green, in *Landscapes of Learning*. Think of tutoring, then, as awakening a young person to the expansive world of print information, literature, and the infinite possibilities of reading, writing, and talking. Here are 14 questions to consider as you prepare for your unique tutoring situation.

What activities establish a good relationship?

"Learning to read begins with the reader," says noted educator Paolo Freire. Get-acquainted conversations can provide an informal reading profile of your student. Direct questions like "what are your grades in English?" will put a student on the spot. Instead, ask about their school preferences, activities with friends and family, passions, and preoccupations. Also, you can seek teachers' suggestions concerning learning style preferences and personal needs, and for ideas on appropriate reading and teaching materials.

Both experience and research show that no single strategy works when it comes to teaching reading, because each reader is unique. If you accept the student as your guide, you can custom-design literacy activities to raise self-confidence, bring meaning to reading, and create a satisfying tutoring relationship.

Notice a new look and focus for *The Tutor*? With this change, we can dig deeper into issues that challenge tutors and mentors as they work in education environments. Each upcoming issue will address one topic related to tutoring, mentoring, or literacy projects. Look for our research on promising practices in the field. Please tell us how you like this new format and send suggestions for future topics to LEARNS at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1-800-361-7890.

Think of tutoring, then, as awakening a young person to the expansive world of print information, literature, and the infinite possibilities of reading, writing, and talking.

Are you willing to be flexible and collaborate?

Choice and control are key issues with adolescent learners. If a tutoring schedule and atmosphere promotes collaboration and flexibility, the student gains a voice in determining what, where, when, and how the work gets done. Ask the student to discuss his feelings about the tutoring sessions. Are they held at a good time and place? Would he choose to change anything? What does he hope to gain from tutoring? Some decisions must clearly be yours, like what you can and cannot offer and start and end times. If you are prompt and dependable, those expectations will also extend to the student. Collaborate with the student to make a calendar of meetings and check that you both have a copy. Clear expectations on both sides will launch a relationship based on trust.

What are the "learning rhythms" of your student?

Learning rhythms will emerge during tutoring sessions. Does a student go strong for 15 minutes and then feel restless, or does she have a hard time settling down? After a few sessions, this knowledge can help structure your work time. A warm-up conversation about a news event, a school issue, or a recent movie can create a good beginning, especially if you convey personal interest. Good language skills are modeled when you ask questions, listen carefully, and give clear responses.

If your student's attention flags midway in the session, take a break and work on something fun. Some possibilities are: creating a dictionary of local slang, playing word games for 10 minutes, or exchanging stories about something that happened. Each of you might write a short poem or reflection on the same subject to read aloud, reinforcing the connection between reading and writing.

Sleepy? Wake up with a short walk outdoors or down the hall, where you can build a conversation around a topic that your student chooses. Asking about favorites often unleashes opinions (favorite movies, hangouts, CDs, or types of music). Following up with open-ended questions, such as "What do you like (or think) about ...?" spurs students to use their language skills to support their opinions.

What choices can you give students?

Teenagers who have disengaged from learning often feel they lack control over their lives. This is especially true for students who have negative attitudes toward reading. Ask your student to bring in any reading he likes to peruse, whether a catalog, comic book, or magazine. He can choose a time in each session for reading this material, and also choose whether he wants to read to you or have you read to him. Allowing students control and choice in reading material helps them relate to the topic and find pleasure in the written word.

Seek the help of librarians and teachers to find high-interest books that are appropriate to your students' ages and skills. Also seek books that encourage readers to enter the experience and perspective of others, including all fiction genres: horror stories, fantasy, science fiction, or romance. Topical magazines will appeal to students' individual interests (e.g., race cars, fashion, bodybuilding). Comic books can motivate less proficient readers with colorful and creative artwork.

What strategies encourage independence and engagement?

Your most difficult challenge may be to instill in your students a sense of their own reading power and autonomy. Many discouraged readers feel that reading is nothing more than a search for the "correct" meaning or ability to answer the questions at the end. The text is in control, the student is the passive recipient, trying to fig-

ure out someone else's meaning.

In *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt describes reading as a "transaction," maintaining that young readers must feel free to react to what they read in order to find meaning in the text. Each young person brings "personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition" to reading.

How can students become active players in their reading transaction? You might ask her what she sees, feels, thinks, or remembers as she reads. Encourage her to relate her reading to her own experience, or to that of others. Sharing your reactions and experience can establish a lively conversation. Other modes, such as a drawing or music, allow students creative opportunities to express personal connections between life and literature.

What connections will make reading matter?

Resistant adolescent readers often do admit that literacy skills can be useful in helping to understand or solve real-life problems. They may suspect this is true for other people but have no idea how it applies to them.

As a first step, help your student distinguish between two kinds of reading: reading for information (e.g., job notices in the newspaper) and reading for the vicarious "living through" experience of a novel or story.

Next, focus on useful reading by going over an article from a newspaper on a provocative topic that affects your student. Discuss possible responses to the article and help him follow up by: writing an article or a letter to the editor, making a phone call or a speech, or collecting a photo essay. Don't forget the creative and personal: poems, song lyrics, drawings, and sculptures. Bring in examples of music, poetry, artwork, or cartoons that express a response to a current event.

If a student is looking for a job, use the classifieds to make a list of contacts. You might collaborate on a letter of application and a resume, and role-play in a job interview. Experiencing the payoff of good literacy skills in the outside world can spark an adolescent's desire to become an active reader and writer.

Can you model your own enthusiasm?

Though every family has its own literacy traditions, some reluctant adolescent readers missed having adults read to them as children. They may also have lacked books or magazines at home.

To fill this gap, think of ways you can model your own love of language. What personal reading material can you share in the tutoring session? You might discuss your own reading habits, or talk about where words come from, and how they change through time. Working together on puzzles or word games can also enliven a session.

Does your learner show interest in diverse cultures? Then you might focus on the oral tradition of literature by playing a recording of an African American or Native American storyteller. There are many variations of oral, dramatic, and visual language, such as Indonesian puppetry or Chinese Kabuki theater. And, of course, you can always discuss the language of popular movies and music.

What outside resources might help?

Once you know your student's interests, look for a variety of resource materials that promote reading for information and pleasure. Try collecting flyers for musical groups, photographs with text, or short newspaper items. If your student reads magazines, or might like a particular one, you can find a copy, bring it to the session, read an article together, and give the student the magazine.

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Talking can be a powerful tool of self-discovery for a teenager, especially with a sympathetic listener ... . Open-ended questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer are the best conversation boosters.

If you're tutoring a student in a particular subject, various sources will help her understand the topic, from *National Geographic* to Web sites on the Internet. Linking new knowledge to a familiar idea helps a student integrate reading content.

How can you build confidence and pride?

Maintaining a portfolio of your student's work can be a confidence builder. Students can contribute poetry, stories, song lyrics, and journal entries—anything that represents effort and progress. Contribute your own thoughts by adding margin notes of encouragement or writing your student a letter.

Student portfolios are often used to document developing skills, new knowledge, and broadening interests, and are a creative representation of the tutoring relationship. Keep the portfolio or journal until the tutoring year is over. Then, you might present it with a special card, or make a gift of a new journal or binder to encourage continued practice.

How can conversation develop literacy skills?

Talking can be a powerful tool of self-discovery for a teenager, especially with a sympathetic listener. Many young people with reading difficulties simply haven't had enough experience using words to express their ideas and points of view. (According to some researchers, students spend, on average, three hours in a school day sitting passively while their teachers talk.) Conversing may be difficult at first, because adolescents are often uncomfortable with an adult they don't know well, especially those perceived as authority figures.

If conversations are a structured part of each tutoring session, barriers will gradually break down. You might schedule five minutes at the beginning devoted to an agreed-upon subject or a casual question such as, "How was the concert last week?" Open-ended questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer are the best conversation boosters. During these conversations, you will be able to convey the pleasure of talk while staying alert for opportunities to teach literacy skills, such as creative language use and articulation of meaning. Good eye contact, positive posture, and an interested expression may encourage your students to ask you questions.

A big help to reluctant learners is the constant reminder that in spoken language, there is no "correct" or "incorrect" English, only language adapted to different situations. Use the analogy of clothing to demonstrate the point. What one wears to school is determined by certain social and school rules (e.g., standard English), and may be very different from what one wears to a sporting event (e.g., non-standard English).

Are there ways to connect reading and writing?

Because reading and writing skills develop together, an adolescent with trouble reading will often have trouble writing. A literacy-rich tutoring environment can suggest various strategies to encourage writing. Again, you can begin with your student's interests. If he is involved with grandparents or older relatives, consider an oral history project. Work together on a set of written questions for a taped interview. When you both listen to the interview, look for other ways to transform spoken language to written materials. You might transcribe the tape and make a booklet with text and photographs that your student can give to family members.

Recommended Reading

Baumann, J.F., & Duffy, A.M. (1997). *Engaged reading for pleasure and learning: A report from the national reading research center.* Atlanta, GA: National Reading Research Center.

Krogness, M.M. (1995). *Just teach me, Mrs. K.: Talking, reading, and writing with resistant adolescent learners.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Heacox, D. (1991). *Up from underachievement.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Wilhelm, J.D. (1997). *You gotta BE the book.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Do cultural differences require special sensitivity?

If you are tutoring an English-language learner, take time to learn about your student's culture. News clippings or magazine articles about the "home" country might open up a desire to communicate. Ask the student to teach you a few words of her language and incorporate them into each session.

Or you might share some music from her country, and then she could translate the lyrics for you. Consider working together on a version in English or translating the lyrics of an English song into her language. Explore every opportunity to bridge cultures. Librarians can help you select reading and other materials that dispel stereotypes, support the development of healthy self-esteem, reinforce cultural identity, and promote a sense of inclusion.

How can you incorporate reading aloud in tutoring sessions?

Many reluctant readers actually enjoy reading aloud, especially in a setting away from the classroom and their peers. An action-packed story read aloud can be riveting for the listener. Reading aloud can also help an underprepared reader direct his energy and focus his attention in a tutoring session.

Give your student the choice to either read aloud to you, or have you read to him, or take turns. Encourage your student to stop the reading at any point and discuss the story. What would he do if he were in this situation? How would he change the story? What will happen next? By inserting one's self into the text, a reader begins to experience the wonder of an alternative world. Reading a to-be-continued story promotes a sense of accomplishment as your student experiences the progress made each session.

Just as children love to hear their favorite stories again and again, older readers may benefit from hearing a story, poem, or particular passage more than once. Emphasize that rereading a text is an integral part of learning for everyone. It not only helps one better understand the text, but also allows time for savoring the details and considering larger issues.

How can you focus on the positive?

Since you are not responsible for testing or giving grades, you can be encouraging and positive about a student's efforts. If you recognize specific skill development —good thinking, creativity, tone, rhythm —praise will help reinforce further development. Just remember that adolescents won't welcome inappropriate, excessive, or false praise. You might notice when he arrives on time, remark that you enjoyed your last conversation, say you've been thinking about what he said, or find an article that supports her point of view. These interactions will create a positive, trusting, and meaningful tutoring relationship.

Evaluating skills and measuring progress are always important, but you can encourage your student to examine her own work, critique strengths and weaknesses, and set goals for improvement. Progress will be visible if you use the portfolio to keep a record of skill development and goals. When goals have been achieved, such as the number of books read, what interesting rewards or celebrations can you plan?

References

Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Rosenblatt, L. (1983). *Literature as exploration.* New York: The Modern Language Association of America.

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